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THE POWER OF LISTENING: DIAPRAXIS, PLAY AND ANOTHER GRAMMAR FOR THE CITY

Deise Faria Nunes (BR/NO) is an artistic concept developer, researcher, writer and dramaturg, and currently a PhD researcher in theatre at the University of Agder, Norway. Among other things, she has acted as founder, producer and project leader for ACTS Laboratory for Performative Practice in Oslo, and as a project developer and dramaturg for Nordic Black Theatre. In this essay she writes about Mônica Nador and Bruno Oliveira's work on community building in relation to the concepts of *diapraxis*, *performance* and *play*.

Deeply rooted at the heart of Jardim Miriam, on the southern outskirts of São Paulo, the Brazilian visual artists Mônica Nador and Bruno Oliveira (also known as Bruno O.) are preparing for the inception of *Another Grammar for Oslo*; this community-based art project is a commission by the first edition of the Oslo Biennale.

The idea of building other grammars and ways of understanding, reading and narrating the city and its histories will be realised through stencil printmaking and patterning workshops, and the creation of a series of short texts, poems and songs by women of different origins, all contributing to the formation of a collective network of meanings.

In this short essay, I would like to focus on the duo's work and community building activity, in the light of the concepts *diapraxis*, *performance* and *play*.

Jardim Miriam, São Paulo – Oslo, Norway

Writing about Mônica Nador and Bruno O. is not possible without considering their backgrounds. Nador was born into an upper-middle class family in the city of Ribeirão Preto. Her interest in art was already present in her youth awakened by her father, a medical doctor and amateur painter.

After graduating in art, Nador set about producing works for gallery-curated sales exhibitions. An established and well-selling artist, she found herself losing faith in and enthusiasm for the art scene. She then pursued further studies leading to an MFA. During the conversation we had before writing this essay, Nador told me that her research at that point led her to a deeper understanding of the class structure in Brazil. She acknowledged the fact that at that time the art world was in no way democratically accessible to the less privileged.

Nador decided to move to Jardim Miriam in 2004, where she set up a community-based project. The residents of this district known as the ABCD – one of the largest industrial areas in the country – formed strong movements against labour exploitation, to improve workers' rights and social equality.

In that same year, she established the organisation JAMAC – Jardim Miriam Art Club. The space offers stencil, silkscreen and audio-visual workshops and fosters cultural activities at the intersection between art and practices for democratic citizenship. JAMAC's main objective is to build training processes that stimulate encounters between art and life, aesthetics and politics. The space hosts activities such as workshops, exhibitions, round table discussions and open-access classes, always focusing on diversity, inclusion and the right to access city spaces and memory.

Bruno O., an educator and visual artist, first met Nador through a project at Jardim Miriam. He is a PhD research fellow in Visual Arts at UFMG, Federal University of Minas Gerais, working on the project *Performing the Institution: Power grammars, insurgent aesthetics and devices of counter-hegemony in Latin American art*. A community worker, he is the coordinator at Casa 1, a welcoming space for LGBT youth expelled from their homes due to non-acceptance of their sexuality. Bruno O. also works at JAMAC under Nador's leadership.

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Oslo is a divided city. The calm waters of the Akers River tell the history of the city's industrialisation and urbanisation in the 19th and 20th centuries. Two apparently antagonistic urban spaces emerged from this process: the wealthy and mostly white Westside and the more socio-economically challenged Eastern and Southern districts, where people of colour, migrants and a multicultural population is concentrated. According to the Brazilian philosopher Sueli Carneiro, skin color structures class in Brazil. This reality, very much present in Jardim Miriam, may also affect the prosperous Norwegian capital to a greater extent than the white majority likes to admit.

In their project description, the artists expound their idea of shared art practices aimed at increasing awareness of the exercise of citizenship among communities.

The work will be implemented over a two-year timeframe, supported by the city's Deichman public libraries and produced by the Biennale. The community-based performing arts project Nordic Black Theatre, situated in the multicultural central-eastern area of Oslo, is also involved. Using facilities provided by the libraries, Nador and Oliveira will offer workshops in drawing and stencil printing techniques to different local communities. The Deichman libraries are spaces that naturally support intercultural and intergenerational exchanges and are therefore a fundamental element of the project:

This project [aims] at the recovery of the narratives from their territories of origin and their affective memories. It is understood that such stories are present [in] the structure of the territory, although invisible in the official narratives. Above all, it is intended to stimulate the exercise of the fundamental role of art being socially useful, engaging everyone involved in the work (...).

Nador and Oliveira will, through their idea of new narratives for the city, build on their experiences of art as a means of social change, from the particular reality of Jardim Miriam, applying them to the increasingly more othered Eastern Oslo by means of diapraxis and performance, as outlined below.

Dialogue, diapraxis and performance

The concept of diapraxis was coined by the Danish researcher Lissi Rasmussen in her dissertation *Diapraxis og dialog mellem kristne og muslimer* (*Diapraxis and dialogue between Christian and Muslims*, 1997), which was later published as a book.

For Lissi Rasmussen, dialogue in the sense of two-way communication, is defined as happening in a spirit of mutual trust and respect. Through her fieldwork experience on the African continent, she discovered that dialogue is meaningful only when rooted in co-existence and common practice. This discovery led her to coin the concept diapraxis, that is, dialogue as action. For Rasmussen, dialogue can only exist through diapraxis. Based on a common notion of life through interpersonal identification and compassion, found both in Christian liberation theology and in the Quran, she defines diapraxis as sharing activities and experiences with others.

This understanding of collective participation is also a fundamental component of performance.

Since the mid-1960s, American theatre director and scholar Richard Schechner has been concerned with one major question: what features do theatre events belonging to diverse genres share with religious and secular rituals, sports, play, political demonstrations and artistic events? Can the nature of such events be understood by using a common set of tools and methods? Schechner's inquiries led to a productive collaboration with the American anthropologist Victor Turner. The resulting reflections were later organized under the name *Performance Theory*. For Schechner, there are certain recognizable patterns common to activities such as ritual, theatre, dance, music, sports, play, social drama and various popular entertainments. Participatory art projects connected to building or strengthening communities, such as the JAMAC project and *Another Grammar for Oslo*, can also be understood in terms of performance theory.

For Turner:

A performance is a dialectic of 'flow', that is, spontaneous movement in which action and awareness are one, and 'reflexivity', in which the central meanings, values and goals of a culture are seen 'in action', as they shape and explain behaviour. A performance is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures.

This definition comprises two aspects that are experienced at the same time: 'flow' – the aesthetic, dramaturgical aspect, the immaterial component of the art (making) experience – and 'reflexivity' – the socio-cultural aspect, the one that fosters the ties that keep the community together.

Some characteristics of performance are essential to an understanding of such phenomena. Here I can mention a few, for instance:

Time: Performance time is different from daily life time in certain specific ways:

Event time: the sequence of actions belonging to the event shall be fully performed independently of daily life time. This feature has of course boundaries connected to the general timeframe defined by the community or facilitators of the event.

Set time: an arbitrary timeframe is imposed on the event.

Symbolic time: performance time is a representation of another timeframe.

Objects: in performance, objects may have a different value than in daily life. Their meaning may vary according to symbols and traditions and their manipulation may have great significance for the whole development of the performance event. **Non-productivity:** performance activities generate no monetary wealth and do not contribute to economic productivity from a capitalist perspective.

Another relevant aspect of performance theory is the restoration of behaviour or twice-behaved behaviour. As Schechner affirms: "Performance means: never for the first time." This does not deny the possibilities of experiencing something new every time a particular performance event takes place, perhaps in a new room, perhaps with different participants, most certainly with something unexpected taking place. Twice behaved behaviour refers to the idea of performance as an inherent part of human nature, something anterior to culture and therefore always with us.

This aspect rests on the fact that behaviour exists separately from the person who behaves. This condition makes it possible to store, transmit, manipulate or transform behaviour. As in the games children play, for instance.

The performance concept of play can be a useful tool for approaching interactions in the social practice arts field.

In addition to ludic activities common to childhood, play can have a variety of meanings and uses: in the English language, the term is applied both to define acting, playing musical instruments and games, or practicing sports. It is a difficult concept to pin down or imprison in a fixed frame of definitions or characteristics.

Play can be considered as a social meeting place in which the rules are set by the players or insiders according to a given tradition. Social conventions such as status, gender and cultural identities are reaffirmed, challenged, tested, changed or reorganized. It is not likely to have a goal in itself; doing the activity is the goal. It may or may not lead to concrete results. In the case of *Another Grammar for Oslo*, there is an established idea of creating outputs in the form of artworks, although, according to Nador, it is always the participants' engagement that sets the agenda. In this way, diapraxis, performance and play can be considered analogous activities.

The power of listening to create new vocabularies, syntaxes and meanings

There have been discussions about the potentially interventionist character of community-based, institutionally-run art projects. Sometimes, the ways in which the art scene approaches challenged communities is infused with often subconscious – but nonetheless deeply damaging – patronizing notions of knowledge and cultural values. An outsider usually needs a long time to process all the information and establish the necessary relations.

In order to establish a conversation through a certain practice, as in the idea of diapraxis, or to create meaningful, community-based performance spaces, it is of major importance to develop the ability to listen. To the forces that pulse in the shared life of the locals. To the community's own time, rhythm, relations, virtues and problems.

Another Grammar for Oslo is conceived as a listening project. Connecting community spaces, democratic access to the city, artistic craft and a series of flexibly structured events, participants in the project will be empowered to inscribe their own vocabularies, syntaxes and meanings in the city's cultural and artistic landscape. Through their extensive and deeply committed experiences with the residents of Jardim Miriam, Mônica Nador and Bruno O. are setting out to act as amplifiers of long-silenced Oslo voices.

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